

A Foreign Policy From the Founding

Mike Pompeo

Essay
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American Mind



United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered the keynote address at the Claremont Institute's 40th Anniversary Gala as this year's recipient of the Institute's Statesmanship Award.

Read the transcript of the Secretary's remarks as delivered below. Watch the full video [here](#).



SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you. Thank you all. People talk about my job being nerve-wracking. There is nothing as nerve-wracking as that much applause before you speak. (Laughter.) And you should know – Ryan, thank you for the kind introduction too – I was on this trip when I heard about this little dustup about the advertisement for this dinner, and it said they wouldn't let him post because of the offensive material. I'm like, is that me? (Laughter.) But I also know a point – with no advertisement and this crowd, you'd have needed a much bigger room.

So it is wonderful. It is great to be out with a group of people who care about America so deeply. Thank you for having me. (Applause.) I want to thank the Claremont Institute as well. As you said, I just got back on a trip where I had gone to Finland to talk about America's interests in the Arctic. I made a little detour to Iraq – (laughter) – and then back to London. Makes Southern California weather feel pretty good. (Laughter.)

First of all, I was – you talked about this is home. I grew up at basically Harbor and McFadden. My father still lives in that house. I was there today. (Applause.) Yeah, it was really something. He's lived in that house since 1961, and today they had the whole little street blocked off with California Highway Patrol and the security team, and the neighbors were all coming out like, "I know that kid." (Laughter.)

The Bible describes John the Baptist as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." And I sometimes think about the Claremont Institute that way.

I call Kansas home. It's where I spent the bulk of my adult life outside of the military. But I had spent my childhood here, of course, when Ronald Reagan was the governor. And I

have to tell you, California has changed a little bit since I left. (Laughter.) I'm going to have to come back and help you all get it right. (Cheers and applause.)

It's so important that you all know, all the people who make Claremont tick, Ryan and the team and all of those who contribute, your work goes way past California. And as Ryan said, there's been a lot written in the *Claremont Review of Books* that clarify the aims and undertakings of what we're trying to do in this administration, and the hundreds of fellows that you've educated over the years who are defending the first principles on the front lines. In fact, Ryan mentioned I have a senior advisor, Mary Kissel, and a speechwriter, who is sitting over here to my left. The two of them wrote this tonight, so if you don't like it, it is on you. (Laughter.)

It also looks like my Leo Strauss quote, so you're the only ones that might laugh at that joke, so thank you. (Laughter.)

Look, all kidding aside, your work to preserve the ideals of the American Founding is absolutely what America needs. There is literally, as I travel the world, there is nothing more distinctive about the United States than our politics, and wonderfully so. We are the truly greatest experiment in human freedom that the world has ever seen, and I, as America's senior diplomat, benefit from that every day. (Applause.)

I want to do a little bit of the history, because the foreign policy of the early republic reflected the attitude of a free nation which has thrown off an imperial power, which, frankly, I just left. (Laughter.) And look, I think there's three words that characterize that. They would be realism, restraint, and respect, and I'll talk about each of them just for a moment.

First, realism. The Founders were keen students of human nature and history. They saw that conflict is the normative experience for nations. Hamilton put this *Federalist* 34. He said, "To judge from the history of mankind, we shall be compelled to conclude that the fiery and destructive passions of war reign in the human breast with much more powerful sway than the mild and [beneficial] sentiments of peace."

I'll simplify: The Founders knew peace wasn't the norm. And in response to this reality, the Founders knew the first duty of the federal government was to provide for the safety of its citizens. Madison said, "[Security] is an avowed and essential object of the American Union." You all know that.

How about restraint? The Founders sought to protect our interests but avoid adventurism. The Barbary War, fought so soon after independence, was an effort of last resort to protect our vital commercial interests. The Monroe Doctrine – relevant even today – was a message of deterrence, not a license to grab land. "Peace and friendship," said Jefferson, "with all mankind is our wisest policy, and I wish we may be permitted to pursue it. But the temper and folly of our enemies may not leave this in our choice."

And finally, respect. The Founders had recently cast off the tyranny of an empire. They were not eager to subjugate others. In 1821, John Quincy Adams wrote that America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." But indeed, quite the opposite: "She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all." And as the first nation of its kind, the world would see America as a model for self-government and liberty. And a special bond would link America to any nation that loved those things.

Let's contrast the Founders' ideas to the foreign policy of the late 20th and early 21st century. American leaders had drifted from realism. At the dawn of the post-Cold war era, hopes were high that enfolded the likes of China and Russia into a so-called rules-based international order would hasten their domestic evolution towards democracy. We hoped this order – comprised of institutions and agreed upon by codes of conduct –

would temper their actions towards neighbors and to our country.

But we can see now 30 years on, after the end of the Cold War, that the Putin regime slays dissidents in cold blood and invades its neighbors; that the Chinese Communist Party has detained more than one million Chinese Muslims in labor camps, and it uses coercion and corruption as its primary tools of statecraft. And as I'll talk about here in just a little bit, both countries have foreign policies intent on eroding American power. We can't blame our leaders for their optimism, but we can blame them for having misjudged those regimes.

America too had become unrestrained, untethered from common sense. The institutions, the institutions we built to defend the free world against the Soviet menace, had drifted from their original mission set. Indeed, some of them had become directly antagonistic to our interests, while we kept silent. We bought into trade agreements that helped hollow out our own middle class. We sacrificed American competitiveness for accolades from the UN and climate activists. And we engaged in conflicts without a clear sense of mission. No more. (Applause.)

And to round out this trio, we had lost sight of respect – not for other nations, but for our own people and for our ideals. We cozied up to Cuba. We struck a terrible agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran that put the regime's campaigns of terrorism and proxy wars on steroids. And many of our leaders were more eager to delight the Davos crowd than champion the principles that have made us the greatest nation that civilization has ever known. (Applause.)

By the way, the Claremont Institute sadly knows, I could also name a certain tech company that we spoke about earlier that's forgotten our first principles too. (Applause.)

I am very confident. I am very confident that the Founders would have been perplexed by those moves. We had too much confidence in the international system and not enough confidence in our own nation. And we had too little courage to confront regimes squarely opposed to our interests and to our values. (Applause.)

But I bring you good news. One man said, "Enough." And in 2016, you all sent him to the White House. (Cheers and applause.) President Trump's prescription for foreign policy was very simple, right? "America First." Now, that's been mocked a bit. The media has spun this phrase as a dog-whistle for racists and xenophobes. But I've spent a fair amount of time with President Trump, in fact, virtually every single day these past two years. (Laughter.) Yeah, sometimes so good, sometimes more challenging for all of us, yes. (Laughter.)

But here's what this really means. It means that like millions and millions of Americans, President Trump loves this country and wants to see it do well in the world – not at the expense of others, but to the benefit of our people, and by extension, the nations that share our values and our strategic goals. It's really that simple. If there is a natural law of foreign policy, this is it.

And while he wishes every country enjoyed the freedoms we enjoy here, he has no aspiration to use force to spread the American model. You can see it in the administration's record of its using force. I can prove it to you.

And so – and so importantly – he believes America is exceptional – a place and history apart from normal human experience, the ones that our Founders spoke about. President Trump believes it is right – indeed more than right – for America to unashamedly advance policy that serves our interests and reflects American ideals. (Applause.)

Certainly, our course of action in this administration reflects a gut-level – a gut-level – for

love of country. But taking the pursuit of America's interests up a notch is not just honorable; it's urgent in this new era of great power competition. (Applause.)

On China, the President has taken action to stop China from stealing our stuff. No longer will American companies be forced to hand over their technological crown jewels as the price of doing business in China. (Applause.) When a deal doesn't work for the United States, no deal shall be done. (Applause.)

We have bolstered our military presence in the South China Sea, and we've put nations on notice around the world that the sale of key infrastructure and technology companies to China threatens their national security. And we've strengthened the group, the entity, that screens Chinese and other foreign investments here in the United States. We are also fighting the battle to make sure that the Chinese Communist Party cannot burrow into the data of billions of internet users through companies like Huawei and ZTE. (Applause.) The internet of tomorrow must have buried within it Western values and must not belong to China. (Applause.)

This has been a real pivot to Asia. (Laughter.)

So look, how else are we putting America First? As I - I gave a speech in Brussels. I didn't get any of this applause. (Laughter.) (Cheers and applause.) I talked - I spoke that day in Brussels about international agreements and institutions in which the United States enters, and I said that for us to continue to participate it must be with our consent and has to serve our interests and ideals. It seemed pretty straightforward. (Laughter.)

Look, consider our stated intent to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty with Russia. I don't watch much TV, but I have seen the media mandarins swear up and down that America was putting the world closer to nuclear war. But as the 28 NATO Allies unanimously concurred, Russia is in violation of the treaty, putting Vladimir Putin closer to an asymmetric advantage of his nuclear forces. Why would one party honor a deal when the other wouldn't? It made no sense. (Applause.) We chose to abrogate the treaty but not abrogate defending the American people. (Applause.) I'll put it another way: Our decision on missiles wasn't rocket science. (Laughter.) Yeah, that was one of your own wrote that one. (Laughter.)

Look, we're also working to ensure that the future of international agreements unambiguously advances American interest. Past efforts, agreements that we entered into with North Korea, only produced more North Korean nukes and American diplomatic failure. Our diplomacy with the DPRK is laser-focused on making sure that we never again have to reopen the North Korean nuclear file.

I just this past trip to Hanoi came across a major threshold. I had spent more time with Chairman Kim than even Dennis Rodman. (Laughter and applause.)

But I want you all to know this is serious business. We want to make sure that Americans are safe, and we are determined to get our policy with North Korea and to get our allies, Japan and South Korea, and to convince the Russians and the Chinese that this is in the world's best interest. And our diplomatic efforts to get the entire world to engage, to see the risk for what it is, and to help us get North Korea to a brighter future, is something that our administration is profoundly proud of. (Applause.)

And finally, putting America First means proudly associating with nations that share our principles and are willing to defend them. It's true; we had some earlier comments from Washington's Farewell Address. He warned against permanent alliances, but that same speech praised connections with nations based on "policy, humanity, and interest."

We have reaffirmed America's historic alliance with the only free nation in the Middle

East: Israel. (Cheers and applause.)

We are banding together with the likeminded nations like Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea to make sure that each Indo-Pacific nation can protect its sovereignty from coercion. It's part of a greater commitment to a free and open order. You all know this: The distinctive mark of Western Civilization is the belief in the inherent worth of human beings, with the attendant respect for God-authored rights and liberties. Indeed, the Declaration says that "all men are created equal." And we ought to help nations protect these first things – and human rights as well.

This new pride in taking America's interests seriously is not just an American phenomenon. Countries all over the world are rediscovering their national identities, and we are supporting them. We're asking them to do what's best for their people as well. The wave of electoral surprises has swept from Britain to the United States and all the way to Brazil.

You've all heard the famous line, "What's good for General Motors is good for the United States." (Laughter.) I actually think the last administration would have said, "What's good for the world is good for the United States." Our focus is that, "What's good for the United States – a foreign policy animated by love of our unique way of life – is good for the world." (Applause.)

And as I wrap out, I want to talk about why that is.

First, countries who share our same principles find new avenues for collaboration with us. I mentioned before I returned from an Arctic Council Ministerial, a bunch of foreign ministers from eight countries whose nations touch the Arctic's. I made it clear America is now sharpening its focus in an area of increasing strategic importance. We want to cooperate with likeminded democracies who share our vision of the Arctic, and guard against those who don't – nations like China and Russia. My task as America's most senior diplomat of building alliances is hard work, but they are essential for securing the rights the Founders sought to protect.

Second, love of one's country forces leaders to better honor the will of their own people. President Trump does that every day. (Applause.)

Hamilton had it right. Hamilton had the right idea. He said, "Under every form of government, rulers are only trustees for the happiness and interest of their nation." If democratic leaders are not responsive to the jolts of patriotism which are sweeping the world, they won't be leaders for long. Those who understand that nations are the best vehicle for securing the rights of their citizens will have a much longer shelf life. (Applause.)

Third – the third reason why is that I've always been a big believer in competition. I didn't like it when I ran a small business. I wanted my own little monopoly. (Laughter.) But the truth of the matter is we all know that America can compete and win against our adversaries on security and any economic issue. But even more importantly, competition forces the best ideas to rise. And among political ideas, there is none better than the American idea. (Cheers and applause.)

I have the enormous privilege to serve as America's most senior diplomat, and what I want the world to see – the unsurpassed attractiveness of the American experiment – is something I market every day. I want other nations to take this same path. Our first president desired the same thing. He used words like this. He said, "The applause, the affection, and the adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it."

Look, what I've just outlined here is a foreign policy that returns America to old truths. We talk about this inside the State Department all the time. Let's speak about real facts

and real truth. It's something I know that this institute, the Claremont Institute, has a deep appreciation for. President Trump has helped put the world back on track to a nation-first trajectory, and I am confident that this reawakening will last well beyond this, his presidency. As just one example you should see, look at how both parties now are on guard against the threat that China presents to America – maybe except Joe Biden. (Laughter and applause.) God love him. (Laughter.)

Winston Churchill – a name very near to this, dear to this organization – said, “America is like a giant boiler. Light a fire under it, and there's no limit to the amount of heat it can generate.” A fire was truly lit back in 2016. Bathed in its light, we have embarked on a foreign policy that takes seriously the Founders' ideas of individual liberty and constitutional government. And because of it, American exceptionalism – and the American Founding – will remain alive and well in the 21st century.

Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless these United States of America.
(Applause.) ■■■



[Mike Pompeo](#) is the United States Secretary of State. He previously served as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Prior to joining the Trump Administration, he was serving in his fourth term as congressman from Kansas' 4th District. Pompeo served on the House Intelligence Committee, the Energy and Commerce Committee, and the House Select Benghazi Committee.

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